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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 004893

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SUBJECT: TURKISH FM GUL VISITS DAMASCUS, PRESSES ASAD TO ACT CONSTRUCTIVELY

REF: A. ANKARA 4878

[B.](#) ANKARA 4804

PolCouns Janice G. Weiner, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: In Turkish FM Gul's one-day visit to Damascus August 22, Gul urged President Asad to shock the world by articulating a positive message on Middle East peace and fully supporting UNIFIL, according to MFA Director General for Middle East Bozkurt Aran. Asad welcomed the idea of Turkish participation in a PKO and offered to allow Turkish logistical support to pass through Syria. Asad said resolving the Palestinian issue remained key and expressed some concerns about UNIFIL's possible role. Gul's visit to Syria followed on his August 20 trip to Israel and an August 16 visit to Lebanon (reftels). End Summary.

¶2. (C) Advisor to the PM and FM Ahmet Davutoglu, MFA DG Aran and a two-star general from the Turkish General Staff (focused on possible UNIFIL deployment logistics) accompanied Gul. Gul met with President Bashar al-Asad for almost two hours, held a briefer meeting with Deputy President Farouk al-Shara and a perfunctory meeting with Foreign Minister Moualem. Aran did not refer to any contact with HAMAS during the delegation's six-hour stay in Damascus.

Gul's Message: Take a New, Positive Approach for Peace

¶3. (C) Gul's focus in the meeting with Asad was on Middle East peace. Gul told Asad the recent Middle East crisis has brought both challenges and opportunities to the region, according to Aran. The door was now open for a new, comprehensive peace initiative. Gul told Asad that Syria's reactions to date had been uniformly negative and reactive. Gul urged Asad to "shock the international community" by giving a positive message on prospects for peace in the Middle East and the role Syria is prepared to play.

¶4. (C) Asad admitted that his August 15 speech was negative and ineffective. Aran characterized Asad's response as cool at first but said that Gul's assertive repetition of these points throughout the meeting appeared to have "made a dent".

Gul pointed out that events are changing for the better; now was the time for a new approach. Aran described Deputy President Shara as "negative as always". Shara offered numerous examples of Syrian frustration with the international community's response to Syria overtures; Gul reportedly continued to push back.

Syria Supports Turkish Participation in UNIFIL

¶15. (C) FM Gul encouraged Syria to give full support to UNIFIL and said Turkey is considering contributing, Aran stated. Asad said Syria would welcome Turkish participation in a peacekeeping operation as a positive contribution to regional stability. Syria could assist Turkey's logistical needs by allowing equipment and supplies to be transported overland through Syria.

Asad to Gul: MEPP, UNIFIL, Shebaa Farms

¶16. (C) Asad told Gul that reviving the Middle East peace process (MEPP) was important and that the ceasefire was key. The Palestinian issue was now the main issue that must be tackled. The MEPP should be re-visited and given a push in the right direction. To that end, Asad was sending FM Moualem to Finland. With respect to UNIFIL, Asad expressed concern that UNIFIL not be comprised only of western countries. He added that Syria was not happy that some parties have tried to change the mandate of UNIFIL to be closer to Chapter 7.

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¶17. (C) Asad stated that UNIFIL should not be responsible for disarming Hezbollah; this was an internal matter for Lebanon. Aran told us that Gul himself did not object or raise the issue of stopping the flow of arms to Hezbollah. Asad pitched Hezbollah as trustworthy; its leaders mean what they say. On Shebaa Farms, Asad stated that Syria does not regard the issue as a mere technicality; it should be part of a comprehensive settlement. Demarcation of the Lebanon/Syria border should happen first, though Syria views Shebaa Farms as part of Lebanon.

¶18. (C) Comment: Gul's day trip to Damascus marks the end of his Middle East tour - to Lebanon, Israel, and Syria - as Turkey considers whether to play a role in UNIFIL. Otherwise, Gul's message to Asad was repetitive and focused: change your demeanor.

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